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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the negative stereotypes so long foisted on witty women and the move of contemporary witty women writers into a comic vision beyond the imposed connection of female wit to sly cleverness and witchcraft. To illustrate how the woman writer had to cope with a prejudice against and a fear of her wit, the paper considers three fictional cunning women: May, in Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale"; Scheherazade, in "The Arabian Nights"; and the goddess Diana, in a curious creation myth connected to the origin of witchcraft. The paper also explores the figure of the witch, an ominous figure lurking in the woman writer's psyche. The paper compares several women writers to witches in terms of wit with words, relationship to the community, and fear of persecution and ridicule. Twenty-six footnotes are included. (KEH)

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Women, Wit, and Witchcraft: The Burden of Stereotypes

More and more, contemporary American women writers are using wit as a strategic controlling device -- as a device to engage, cajole, disarm, or otherwise charm their readers into sympathy with their comic vision. Their increasing use of such light-hearted wit suggests that they are overcoming the burden placed on them by legendary clever-tongued women. From places as far apart as England and Persia come stories of cunning women who achieve astonishing (and often immoral) gains from their clever use of words. "That women are deficient in judgment or good sense is held as a fact not to be disputed...," reads a note to The Arabian Nights, "but that they possess a superior degree of cunning is pronounced equally certain and notorious."[1] This paper will examine three of these fictional cunning women: May, in Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale," Scheherazade in The Arabian Nights, and the goddess Diana in a curious creation myth connected to the origin of witchcraft.[2] Such stories suggest that the woman writer had to cope with a prejudice against, and a fear of, her wit before she ever put pen to paper.

This paper will also consider another ominous figure lurking in the woman writer's psyche -- the figure of the witch. A witch's power is evoked through chants and spells -- that is, through her skill with words. A writer's strength also depends on her skill with words. Historically, witches were persecuted while early women writers were ridiculed and scorned. It is probably not a coincidence that the image of the witch keeps surfacing in the writing of women. The relationship of the witch to the community, simultaneously powerful but feared and ostracized, must have appeared to many a woman writer as a relationship ominously analogous

to her own, or to her fears of her own, situation.

In the following discussion, "wit" is to be understood in the broadest sense -- to mean all skill with words, not necessarily for humorous effect. But if all women writers feel the shadow of the witch, then I suspect the comic writer would feel it more so -- the defiant cackling creature on the broomstick would loom even larger over her. As Judith Wilt observed, "when we have to do with women comics, matriarchal comics, we have to do with witches."[3]

I am indebted to the brilliant and inspiring connections made by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, both in The Madwoman in the Attic and in No Man's Land, but particularly in the opening section of Madwoman, where they urge that "a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her."[4] I am focusing on two specific types of monster imagery -- the schemer and the witch -- in order to suggest that the witty woman writer had to purge wit of its sinister associations before she was free to create works that were thoughtful, compassionate, and even light-hearted as well as witty.

Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale" can be read simply as a humorous warning to old men about what to expect if they foolishly lust after young brides. The characters' names alone -- January and May -- anticipate the problem. We expect that fresh young May will betray withered old January and we are not disappointed. But it is not the fact of May's betrayal so much as her astonishingly clever excuse when January catches her in the very act of sex that concerns us. It is not only the cleverness of her words, nor the fact that they were granted her magically by the fairy queen, but rather that this queen has promised to give all women equally clever answers

to extricate themselves from equally compromising situations that becomes distinctly worrisome:

> For lak of answere none of hem shal dyen.
> Al hadde men seyn a thyng with bothe his yen, (2271-2)

The misogynistic assumption that all women after May will need such magical aid is troublesome enough, but it is in the assurance that all women will get it -- that they will all have clever and effective excuses for gross misconduct -- that we best see the projection of male fear of women's wit.

January, who has inexplicably grown blind, is trying to enjoy his young wife in the private garden he created for them alone. He is so jealous that, once blinded, he always keeps a hand on her. Nevertheless, May has managed to get her young lover inside the garden and signals for him to climb a pear tree. All that remains is for her to free herself from January's hand. She feigns so sharp a longing for a pear (thereby flattering the old man by suggesting he has impregnated her) that he allows her to climb the tree, and use his own back as a step up. No sooner is she in the tree than Damyan is in her:

> And sodeynly anon this Damyan
> Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng. (2352-3)

At precisely this moment, of course, January's sight returns. He roars his protest. 'What ails you?' May soothes, not missing a beat, 'I was taught there was no better thing to make you see than to struggle with a man in a tree.' At first January doesn't believe her: "'Struggle,' quod he, 'ye algate in it wente!'" (2376). 'Then,' retorts May, 'the medicine was false.' "Ye had som glymsing, and no parfit sighte" (2383). When January protests that his sight is perfect, May grows indignant: "This thank have I for I have maad you see" (2388). Here January gives up. Either he believes her, or he pretends to believe her, choosing to be blind to the truth rather

than lose his young wife. However one chooses to interpret January's acquiescence,what is clear is that the woman's cunning gave her the last word and that word, quite obviously, was false.

In The Arabian Nights, Scheherazade also has the last word, although her wit serves a noble purpose, unlike May's. Scheherazade saved her innocent life by spinning out such enchanting stories, and stopping them at such crucial points, that the king kept deferring her execution to hear what happened next. Finally, he decided not to kill her at all. But the immoral behavior of the other women who appear in this introductory framework suggest that Scheherazade's fidelity was unique among women -- while she may be both cunning and faithful, most other women are cunning and false. Furthermore, the extreme degree of her cunning -- the calculated confidence Scheherazade placed in her ability to outwit her master -- has a threatening underside. Such skill as this could easily be put to less noble purposes. The story also suggests that all women can handle men through their superior wit -- the chaste as well as the false.

A number a women appear in the introduction before Scheherazade. All of them are unfaithful. The reason the king plans to kill her in the first place is because of his insatiable anger over his wife's infidelity. First he had his wife killed. Then, for three years, he made it a practice to spend the night with a virgin and have her slain the next morning -- until that virgin was Scheherazade.

The king's brother had just slain his own wife for her sexual betrayal when he discovered the infidelity, three years before Scheherazade enters the story. He had witnessed his sister-in-law, along with twenty of her women, indulging in an afternoon of sex with twenty black slaves. When the king learned of it, he proposed

that he and his brother set out to see if any other man had suffered as they had. If not, he felt they ought to kill themselves for shame. But there was no fear of that. They soon came upon a genii, napping with his head in his lady's lap. When she saw the two brothers she gently removed the genii's head from her lap and forced them to have relations with her. She threatened to wake her master and have them killed if they refused. Afterwards, she showed them her collection of ninety-eight rings, tokens from previous lovers, and added their two to her collection. She explained that the genii had carried her off and locked her in a chest with seven locks, which he then placed at the bottom of the sea, because he did not know that "when one of our sex desires to accomplish any object, nothing can prevent her" (p. 9, vol.I).

It is against this background of faithless women that Scheherazade enters the story. The boast of the genii's woman, "When one of our own sex desires to accomplish any object, nothing can prevent her" serves to emphasize the cunning, rather than the bravery, of Scheherazade's plan. For she enters the contest of wills with the king by choice. Her father, the prime minister, was sent out for another virgin. But after three years, there were none left in the city. So Scheherazade insists on going, despite her father's protests. She has her strategy planned before leaving home, instructing her sister to come and request that first story, confident that she can entrap the king with her wit. Her cool confidence is what saves her own life, her father's, and all the virgins in the neighboring cities.

By the time she runs out of stories, 1001 nights later, Scheherazade has borne three male children. She has them brought to her side to create as tender a scene as possible while begging the king to spare her life, even though she has no more stories

to tell. Her confidence in her persuasive skills was not misplaced. The king agrees. Not, he declares, for the children's sake, but because he has seen her to be "ingenious, pure, chaste, virtuous" (p. 555, vol. III, emphasis mine).

The king has learned to trust Scheherazade, then, but only because her ingenuity allowed her to demonstrate her chastity. So rather than arguing in favor of the maligned purity of women, what The Arabian Nights actually emphasizes is their extreme cunning. That an immoral woman, like May, needs to be cunning in order to survive is not a surprising idea. But that even a virtuous lady had better be cunning to survive certainly is.

In an unusual little collection of legends explaining the origin of witchcraft is a woman-centered creation myth. Aradia, The Gospel of Witches, was published by the folk-lorist C.G. Leland in 1889. Leland explained he received this book from a self-professed witch in northern Italy, who gathered the legends from sister witches. Although many later scholars dismissed its authenticity, Margot Adler noted in 1979 that many of the book's details reappear in the rites of modern witchcraft.[5] But the book's validity for the origin of witchcraft is not at issue here. What is important is the connection between the goddess Diana and the power of her words in the creation myth.

In this version, Diana, the moon-goddess, is the goddess of all creation. Out of herself, the first darkness, she divided into darkness and light. She was the darkness. The light was Lucifer. Seeing how beautiful Lucifer was, she desired him: "Wishing to receive the light again into her darkness ... she trembled with desire. This desire was the dawn" (p. 18).

But Lucifer would not yield, so she tricked him into sleeping with her, whereby she conceived Aradia, whom she would later send

to earth to establish witchcraft. Diana exchanged forms with Lucifer's favorite cat, who always slept in bed with him. In the darkness she returned to her own form. According to Leland's translation:

> ... when in the morning he found that he lay by his sister, and that light had been conquered by darkness, Lucifer was extremely angry; but Diana sang to him a spell, a song of power, and he was silent, the song of the night which soothes to sleep; he could say nothing. So Diana with her wiles of witchcraft so charmed him that he yielded to her love. This was the first fascination; she hummed the song, it was as the buzzing of bees (or a top spinning round), a spinning wheel spinning life.
>
> (emphasis mine, p. 19)

Diana's song is the origin of the witch's chant. It is a "song of power" which soothes Lucifer's anger after she tricked him into a night of sex. In other words, he is angered by sex, subdued by words.

This aspect of the creation myth is not unlike Scheherazade's story. In both, it is the sexual act that rouses the man's anger, and the woman's words, her "song of power," that yields his love. Scheherezade, of course, did not trick the king into sex. Her only sin was her sex. She was a young beautiful virgin and that, for the betrayed king, was sin enough. (We can, perhaps, identify this as sin-by-anticipation.) Also, it took her 1001 days of words to soothe him completely -- but she was a folk-heroine, not the goddess of witchcraft. What is parallel is that a woman's sexuality roused the man's anger, not his love. To win his love both women had to rely on skillful words. In all three stories, including May's, sex created only discord, while cunning words restored the harmony -- a harmony that was always in the woman's best interest. The message is clear: a woman's wit is something to be feared, not admired.

It is important to remember that the alleged power of a woman's words exists in literature and legend, but not in life.

Virginia Woolf made a similar observation about the strength of a woman's personality and character. Compiling a long list beginning with Clytemnestra, Antigone, and Cleopatra, Woolf observed:

> ... if women had no existence save in fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; ... But this is women in fiction. In fact, ... she was locked up, beaten, and flung about the room.[6]

And so it was with the power of her words. In literature and legend created by men, a woman's wit may have been cunningly effective. In actual life, she had no voice at all.

Some recent connections between the writer's wit and the witch are merely metaphorical. Fiction is frequently described with words borrowed from the realm of witchcraft. A work can be "spellbinding," "enchanting," and even "bewitching." These adjectives are used as coy affirmatives, with no menacing overtones. Still, they tacitly acknowledge the power of the written word and play with the idea that this power might have a magical source. But when we turn to the history of women writers the connection to witchcraft is no longer so playful.

When women began to write they were often suspected of being witches. According to Gilbert and Gubar, in both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance "even the most talented literary women were constrained by cultural strictures which implied that any intellectual ambition might mean they were evil."[7] Virginia Woolf felt that the connection between the woman writer and the witch moved in the other direction as well:

> When,... , one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a supressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Bronte who dashed her brains out on the moor or moped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to. 8

The connection is still acknowledged. In 1976, a new literary review was begun in France called Sorcières, dedicated to exploring women's creativity and language. The editor, Xavière Gauthier, explained the journal's title in the opening statement of the first issue, called "Why Witches." Her essay is a conscious effort to defend the connection and celebrate only the creative power attributed to witches. "Why witches?" she begins each section, and expands on various responses: "Because witches dance;" "Because witches sing;" "Because witches are alive;" "Because witches are rapturous."[9] Gauthier identifies all creative and articulate women with the figure of the witch and reinterprets the evil attributed to witches in political terms:

> If the figure of the witch appears wicked, it is because she poses a real danger to phallocratic society. We do constitute a danger for this society which is built on the exclusion -- even worse, on the repression -- of female strength. If women were not dangerous for this society they would not have been gagged, imprisoned, repressed for centuries. (p. 203)

Earlier women writers who felt the connection between the writer's craft and the witch's craft didn't always share Gauthier's bravado. One nineteenth-century writer who secretly drew upon witch imagery was, surprisingly, Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888). Most of us know her only as the author of Little Women, but alongside her moral and respectable novels, Alcott secretly indulged in writing gothic tales which featured strong-willed, revengeful, and bewitching heroines. Since she used a pseudonym, A.M. Barnard, and insisted on secrecy, these stories only began to surface in the 1940's, in the research into family letters and unpublished journals. To date, three volumes of these gothic thrillers have been published.[10] Although Alcott once claimed in private correspondence that profit was the only motivation behind her intention to compose "blood and thunder" tales, other evidence

suggests that more was at stake than Alcott cared to admit.[11]

First, there was the freedom that writing behind a pseudonym would grant her. Her relationship to the intellectual giants of Concord was never simple. In spite of (and probably because of) her reverence for both Emerson and Thoreau, Alcott found it difficult to write in Concord. Whenever possible, she rented workspace in Boston. In a revealing conversation, Alcott denied the assertion that Little Women showed her "true style of writing:"

> I think my natural ambition is for the lurid style. I indulge in gorgeous fancies and wish that I dared inscribe them upon my pages and set them before the public.

When asked why she did not dare, Alcott appealed to the repressive atmosphere of Concord:

> How should I dare to interfere with the proper grayness of Old Concord? ... To have had Mr. Emerson for an intellectual god all one's life is to be invested with a chain armor of propriety.
> ...
> And what would my own good father think of me ... if I set folks to doing the things I have a longing to see my people do? No, my dear, I shall always be a wretched victim to the repectable traditions of Concord.[12]

Had Alcott been candid, she would have said that as Louise May Alcott she would remain a victim to tradition, while as H.M. Barnard she was free to explore a different world -- a world populated with strong-willed women who enchant,bewitch, and generally overpower their men.

Behind a Mask or A Woman's Power, published two years before Little Women, is a good example of the way Alcott plays with witchcraft.[13] The heroine, Jean Muir, who claims to be nineteen, arrives as a penniless governess for the daughter of a wealthy family. She immediately excells in everything she does -- from brewing the tea properly to singing plaintive Scottish ballads. But the reader is soon made aware that all is not what it first appears. As soon as the governess retired to her room, she removed

fake braids, "wiped the pink from her face," and "took out several pearly teeth" (pp. 11-12). We come to realize that her manipulative skills are even greater than her cosmetic ones. We watch her contrive, successfully, to inspire marriage proposals from both brothers in the family as well as from their wealthier uncle next door.

The reader is never certain until the final unmasking that Jean Muir is not an actual witch. She admits to so unusually sharp a sense of hearing that she can hear every conversation in a room, she is not faint-hearted at the sight of blood but knows how to devise a life-saving tourniquet, she subdues a wild horse, and knows how to bewitch all the men in the area. When she aroused the lethargic elder brother, who awoke only to fall under her spell, he teasingly accused her of being a witch. And she laughingly agreed: "I <u>am</u> a witch, and one day my disguise will drop away and you will see me as I am, old, ugly, bad, and lost" (p. 86). At this point the reader is at sea. We know she is older than she appears, and behaving manipulatively as well. There is definitely the possibility that she is now telling the truth in the guise of a joke.

But no. Jean Muir is not a witch, only a thirty-year-old destitute and divorced actress. She has been coldbloodedly contriving to secure her future by marrying the wealthiest man in the area. Alcott indulgently created a heroine with an unerring, if not uncanny, instinct to discern each person's needs and pretend to fill them. As Sterne observed, Jean Muir is "a psychological if not a Gothic witch."[14]

What is most intruguing about this story is the location of Alcott's sympathies, which are always with Jean Muir. For what, precisely, was her crime? Basically, that her basic drive was for wealth and security, not love, so that she behaved like a calculating

opportunist rather than the way a woman was expected to, like a romantic fool. Ultimately, witchcraft has been used as a ploy. Alcott was suggesting that in order to survive in the world, a woman needed superhuman, witchlike skills. Fetterly sees this as Alcott's most radical text, as "an incisive analysis of the economic situation of the white middle class woman in late 19th century society." She feels the story is telling us "there is no honest way for a woman to make a living; survival depends upon one stratagem or another -- sell your hair, sell your body, sell your soul; all are equivalent moves in the same game.[15] Sterne invites a more autobiographical reading, since she feels that the story fused "many of the elements that had gone into the life of the author."[16] Ultimately, Fetterly endorses a personal reading as well, albeit a cynical one: "After reading Behind a mask," she remarks, "how else are we to understand Little Women, save as an act of impersonation designed to save her psychological skin and ensure her economic survival?"[17]

While Fetterly may be overstating the degree to which Alcott identified with Jean Muir, there is no doubt that Alcott's economic anxieties, as well as her resentment and frustrations from living under Concord's respectable and patriarchal traditions went into her creation of so devastatingly cynical and clever a heroine. But the story should not be read as straightforward wish-fulfillment. Jean Muir's is an ambiguous victory. She marries the wealthy uncle, thereby securing her financial future, but she will remain a social outcast. Her immediate social community is her husband's family, who have discovered her manipulative tricks. The ambiguity of her victory, then, is perfectly captured in the figure of the witch. Like a witch, Jean Muir is both powerful against, but excluded from, her society. By the end of the tale, Jean Muir is in precisely the

situation Alcott undoubtedly feared she would be in if her pseudonym were revealed -- financially secure but publicly scorned.

A more recent woman writer who was openly drawn to witchcraft (as well as wit in the comic sense) was Shirley Jackson (1916-1965). Her husband, the critic Stanley Edgar Hyman, wrote the jacket description for her first novel, The Road Through the Wall (1948), and described her as "perhaps the only contemporary writer who is a practicing amateur witch, specializing in small-scale black magic and fortune telling with a tarot deck."[18] His flippant tone suggests witchcraft was merely an amusing intellectual hobby rather than the sober pursuit of a troubled woman, which is probably closer to the truth.

The recent informative biography of Jackson's life, Private Demons, by Judy Oppenheimer (1988) keeps returning to the question of Jackson's belief in witchcraft, which suggests that the issue was as awkward for Oppenheimer as it must have been for Jackson's friends and family. When we turn to the function of witchcraft, magic, and the supernatural in her writing we are on far more comfortable ground. As Isaac Bashevis Singer, an admirer of Jackson's, shrewdly observed: "The supernatural expresses the subconscious better than any other events a writer can write about" (p. 228). But since witchcraft was far more than a literary ploy for Jackson, I want to face the more difficult question first -- the question of Shirley Jackson's personal belief in witchcraft.

Jackson knew any interest, let alone belief, in witchcraft would provoke scorn. So she often packaged her public allusions in an acceptable form. In a brilliant lecture on the craft of writing, discussing the novel she had just completed, Jackson commented: "I have always been interested in witchcraft and superstition but never had much traffic with ghosts."[19] Her language makes the

observation so much more palatable. The phrase "never had much traffic with ghosts" mocks the whole enterprise, and suggests her interest in witchcraft is purely intellectual. That is, in fact, what her brother believed: "She studied it like you'd study history," he told Oppenheimer, "I always thought it was a little tongue-in-cheek" (p. 37).

But if we accept her brother's version, what do we make of her eldest son's comment that "my mother believed strongly and firmly in the supernatural. She believed it and was very tuned in to it, perhaps more than she cared to be" (p. 37). Or how do we interpret Jackson's more candid statement in a draft for an earlier lecture she prepared before The Haunting of Hill House (1959) was finished: "No one can get into a novel about a haunted house without hitting the subject of reality head-on; either I have to believe in ghosts, which I do, or I have to write another kind of novel altogether" (p. 226). (I cannot discover whether this riskier commment remained in the final version.)

Her tarot readings were reputed to be so accurate that several of her friends nervously refused to let her tell them their fortunes. Once the family moved to Vermont, in 1945, she never had fewer than six cats at a time. A friend of her elder daughter recalled a dinner when a grey cat jumped on Shirley Jackson's shoulder, seemed to whisper in her ear, and Jackson announced that the cat had told her a poem -- which she then repeated (p. 124). Joanne, her elder daughter, reported another light side to her witchcraft. She kept all the small kitchen tools crammed in one drawer. When she wanted one, she would slam the drawer, call out its name, and open the drawer. According to Joanne, it would always be on top (p. 189).

Still, these intriguing details are hardly conclusive proof.

We probably have to settle for ambiguity. Harriet Fels, wife of a Bennington College president and friend of Jackson's, summed up the ambiguity nicely: "She would allude to witchcraft. She acted as if she believed in it on the one hand, but it was a game on the other hand. She wasn't above sticking pins in dolls, it was a real thing -- but she treated it in conversation as a game" (p. 189).

According to Oppenheimer, everyone knew Jackson had the tools of magic in her home -- her books, devices, and amulets were in plain sight. But she wouldn't even tell her children whether or not she practiced magic in earnest:

> "When she was asked, she would say nothing about whether she did or didn't,' said Laurence. She could joke -- or seem to joke -- about being a witch, she could allude to certain charms and spells in passing, but the actual practice of magic was very private and real to her, something she felt strongly should be hidden from the outside world. 'I wouldn't want to violate any secrets,' Laurence said. (p. 223)

While Laurence's comment suggests he believed her to be in earnest, her younger son, Barry, offered an explanation that leads away from the question of belief and back to the relationship between witchcraft and writing:

> She realized that the only tools the magician needs are in the head. You make the world, you decide what your name is, your role, decide what people are going to think of you by your own force of will. And that's real magic in the real world. (p. 190)

This, as Oppenheimer observes, is "not unlike writing itself" (p.190).

Nearly all of Jackson's fiction deals with the inexplicable workings of the mind. The Bird's Nest (1954) is a witty novel about a young woman who shatters into four different personalities. Hangsaman (1951) is an early novel about a troubled adolescent girl whom we realize (but mostly in hindsight) was not quite sane. Part of Jackson's genius was the way she could present the irrational and troubled sides of the mind in so soothing and comfortable a way that we are carried right along until we realize, too late,

that we have been sympathizing with something beyond our understanding. The Haunting of Hill House is a masterpiece of this technique. Eleanor, a 32-year-old single woman, has been invited to participate in an investigation of an allegedly haunted house. Although she had been totally isolated, emotionally, before this adventure, her isolation is comfortably explained by the fact that she had been caring for her invalid mother for eleven years, until her recent death. Eleanor has one sister, with whom she doesn't get along -- another familiar enough detail. So it makes sense that she grows attached to the other participants and even to the gloomy old house. This is the first time in her life that she has ever been part of a group, the first time in her life that she has ever been happy. When the others realize, from her strange behavior, that she had better leave, she does not want to go. She feels hurt and rejected. We can accept that. It is only when she outwits them, managing to "stay" by wilfully smashing her car into a tree and killing herself, that we are forced to consider a different version of what has been going on. Either the house was genuinely haunted or Eleanor was never sane or some blend of the two had occured right beneath our rational non-comprehending eyes.

Jackson's interest in the illogical workings of the mind was not confined to the certifiably troubled. She believed that the possibility of evil co-existed right alongside the possibility of good within every human. Her most famous story, "The Lottery," is filled with relentlessly ordinary neighborly folks.[20] In this small New England village, goes the tale, a yearly lottery is held, where the entire community cheerfully turns out, draws lots, and proceeds to stone to death whoever happens to receive the blackball. The murder is coldblooded, unmotivated, and totally convincing.

When "The Lottery" was first published in The New Yorker in 1948, it drew more mail than any other piece of fiction they had published. According to Jackson, many of the early letters were not concerned with the meaning. Rather, "what they wanted to know was where these lotteries were held, and whether they could go there and watch."[21] Witchlike, Jackson had conjured up the disturbing evidence that her belief in the universal possibility of evil was not so warped as many of us would wish.

Jackson must have known that writing out her vision of the capacity for evil within everyone would not endear her to the reading public. But for most of her life she seemed able to handle the hostility her writing provoked. "She was always proud that the Union of South Africa banned 'The Lottery,'" wrote her husband after her death, "... she felt they they at least understood the story."[22] For many years, she also seemed able to ignore any community hostility to her different life style. Jackson had always been aware that she and her family did not fit into the village of North Bennington where they chose to live. They lived in town rather than up on the hill with the rest of the Bennington faculty, even though, according to Laurence, "In Vermont, you're not considered a local until you've lived there forty years (p. 214). Furthermore, her husband was a Jew, some of their houseguests were black (Ralph Ellison was a close friend), and she was said to be a witch.

Still, she managed to handle her feelings of isolation and difference until she wrote her last completed novel, We Have Always Lived in the Castle (1962). Possibly this story of two sisters who isolated themselves from the hostile and evil townspeople came too close to her own fears, as Oppenheimer suggests (pp. 233-237).

For whatever reasons, she was unable to quiet the fears writing this novel had awakened. She grew unable to leave home: "I have written myself into the house" she wrote to a friend (p. 237). And she admitted to others that she had, in fact, written into the novel what it was like for her in North Bennington, where she had to walk to the grocery store daily, taunted by the villagers (p. 234). After literally staying indoors for three months, she agreed to see a pyschiatrist. But it was to be three years before she began another novel, and only twenty-nine pages of text were completed when she died in 1965 at age 48.

Ironically and tragically, for the last few years of her life, Shirley Jackson had written herself into the traditional position of the witch on the border of society. She felt both alienated from and persecuted by the community around her. And even if Jackson's feelings of being taunted and scorned originated more in her troubled mind rather than in the community at large, these feelings still reflected her sense of reality. As her son Barry had observed, "you decide what people are going to think of you by your own force of will." Disturbingly, by the end of Jackson's life, her role as a writer seems to have completely merged with her role as a witch.

The allusions to witches in Anne Sexton's poetry also suggest alienation. Sexton's life (1928-1974) was a troubled one. She suffered several breakdowns and suicide attempts before she killed herself in 1974, at age 46. In her poem "The Double Image," witches connect to a mother's guilt, then her attempted suicide.[23] When her baby was sick: "Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,/ I heard them say, was mine. They tattled/ like green witches in my head." In the next verse the baby recovered, the mother attempts suicide:

> The day life made you well and whole
> I let the witches take away my guilty soul
> I pretended I was dead
> until the white men pumped the poison out.

In "The Witch's Life" the witch represents isolation.[24] The speaker recalls an old woman who lived in her neighborhood when she was a child. She sat behind wrinkled curtains, had hair like kelp, a voice like a boulder. The children used to call her a witch. Now grown, the speaker wonders whether, in her own isolation, she isn't becoming that woman: "Only my books annoint me,/and a few friends." "Yes," she decides, "It is the witch's life." In "Her Kind," the speaker does not feel akin to most other women.[25] Rather she feels akin to the woman witch:

> I have gone out, a possessed witch,
> haunting the black air, braver at night;
> dreaming evil,...
> A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
> I have been her kind.

Different, misunderstood, she "is not ashamed to die" because she identifies her future death with the death of all persecuted witched, burned at the stake, tortured at the wheel:

> I have ridden in your cart, driver,
> waved my nude arms at villages going by,
> learning the last bright routes, survivor
> where your flames still bite my thigh
> and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.

In 1910, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) wrote a whimsical short story entitled "When I was a Witch."[26] Fed up with the cruelties of city life, with the daily victimization of the powerless, the female narrator wishes to revenge the helpless. She begins by wishing that all those who beat horses feel the pain themselves. Her wish comes true. Recognizing the power she has, she carefully tries to make her punishment fit the crime: ministers have to preach exactly what they believe, newspapers develop a mysterious color code which exposes their lies, and

parrots start insulting their owners. (This odd revenge on parrot owners is because she felt parrots caged in the city caused unnecessary noise pollution.)

As long as the narrator sticks to revenge wishes, her power holds. But then she thinks about women. She wants to celebrate, rather than revenge, them. She wishes they all might realize the full potential of womanhood: "Its power and pride and place in life" (p. 31). But this wish breaks the spell, removes her power, and cancels all the earlier wishes. Her magic was only "black," we are told, and she had wished "white."

Most witches can only seek revenge, suggests the story. They can punish wrongdoing but cannot promote growth. It is significant that the only witch Gilman could conceive of was powerless to enhance a woman's life because, ultimately, the connection between witches and women writers has not been a helpful, but rather a debilitating one. The woman writer who has been encouraged to identify with a witch is on a limiting and dangerous path. At best, it leads to Gauthier's bravado, at worst, to Jackson's and Sexton's alienation. Although the witch image could seem empowering, as in Alcott's gothic tales, her power is, again, that of revenge, not celebration.

There are many indications that contemporary witty women writers are moving beyond the imposed connection of female wit to sly cleverness and witchcraft. Anne Tyler uses wit to encourage us into compassion, Nora Ephron and Alison Lurie use it as a defense against self-pity, Lisa Alther to cajole her audience into sympathy with her lesbian position, and Grace Paley as a way to soften the sadness in the world and tease us into a more loving and hopeful

life philosophy. While no one can prove that recent writers have, in fact, completely transcended the negative stereotypes so long foisted on witty women, their fiction does suggest thet they are moving in that direction.

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Footnotes:

[1]The Thousand and One Nights, Edward W. Lane, trans. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1889) vol. I, 34. Since this is commonly called The Arabian Nights, I use the more familiar title in my text.

[2]Geoffrey Chaucer, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1957); The Thousand and One Nights, 3 vols.; C.G. Leland, Aradia, The Gospel of Witches (New York: Buckland Museum, 1968). All further references to these works will appear in the text.

[3]Judith Wilt, "The Laughter of Maidens, The Cackle of Matriarchs," in Gender and Literary Voice, Ed. Janet Todd (NY: Holmes & Meier, 1980) 179.

[4]Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic (New Haven: Yale, 1979) 17.

[5]Margot Adler, Drawing Down the Moon (Boston: Beacon, 1986) 57.

[6]Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (NY: Harcourt Brace, 1957) 45.

[7]Gilbert and Gubar, The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women (New York: Norton, 1985) 4.

[8]Woolf, p. 51.

[9]Xavière Gauthier, "Why Witches" in New French Feminisms, Eds Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981) 199-203.

[10]Behind a Mask, Ed. Madeleine Sterne (NY: Morrow, 1975); Plots and Counterplots, Ed. Sterne (NY:Morrow, 1976); A Double Life, Ed. Sterne (Boston: Little Brown, 1988).

[11]Behind a Mask, Intro. vii.

[12]Madeleine Sterne, Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott (Boston: Hall, 1984) 42.

Footnotes (cont.)

[13]Behind a Mask, 3-104. All further references to story in text.

[14]Behind a Mask, Introduction, xviii.

[15]Judith Fetterly, "Impersonating 'Little Women': The Radicalism of Alcott's Behind a Mask," Women's Studies 10 (1983) 2.

[16]Behind a Mask, Introduction, xvii.

[17]Fetterly, 13.

[18]Judith Oppenheimer, Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson (New York: Putnam, 1988) 126. All further references appear in text.

[19]Shirley Jackson, Come Along With Me, Ed. Stanley Edgar Hyman (New York: Viking, 1968) 202.

[20]Shirley Jackson, The Lottery and Other Stories (New York: Farrar, Strauss,&Giroux, 1988) 291-302.

[21]Jackson, Come Along With Me, 214.

[22]The Magic of Shirley Jackson, Ed. Stanley Edgar Hyman (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1966) viii.

[23]Anne Sexton, To Bedlam and Part Way Back (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960) 53.

[24]Anne Sexton, The Awful Rowing Toward God (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975) 11-12.

[25]Sexton, To Bedlam, 21.

[26]The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader, Ed. Ann J. Lane (New York: Pantheon, 1980) 21-31. See also Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's Land (New Haven: Yale, 1988) 88-89 for a similar observation on Gilman's use of witchcraft.